

PLAYBILL

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Jessica Ko (Dou Yi) in *Snow in Midsummer*.
Photo by Jenny Graham.

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WINDOWS INTO SNOW IN MIDSUMMER

THE STORY

Executed for a crime she did not commit, Dou Yi, a young widow, vows to prove her innocence and prophesies ecological disaster. Three years later, New Harmony is ravaged by drought and plagued by locusts. Still, the bars are open and factory workers eat, drink and gossip, because someone new has come into town. Tianyun Lin, a self-made businesswoman, arrives to buy New Harmony's ailing factories from their young owner, Handsome Zhang. Handsome cannot wait to leave town and marry his lover, Rocket Wu.

With so much change and possibility, who cares if it is Ghost Month, when the boundary between the living and the dead is thin and new ventures might attract restless spirits? No one follows the old ways in New China, though maybe they should. When her daughter, Fei-Fei, becomes a conduit for Dou Yi's vengeful ghost, Tianyun, who has her own secrets, finds herself with an impossible task: to solve past and present mysteries and expose the injustices Dou Yi suffered before her curse destroys every living thing.

CHINA'S SHAKESPEARE

Snow in Midsummer is a contemporary adaptation of a canonical Chinese drama, *Dou E Yuan*, a beloved play from the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). It was the second production in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Chinese Classics Translations Project, a cultural exchange that brings Chinese classics to a new audience by exploring dramas written or performed in China before or during Shakespeare's lifetime.

The Yuan Dynasty's artistic and dramatic significance represented a turning point in Chinese culture. Under Mongolian rule, and especially during the reign of Kublai Khan (1260–1294), China underwent a renaissance, a golden age with unprecedented cultural and artistic advances in poetry, theatre, painting, mathematics and medicine. Yuan drama established a repertoire that has resonated beyond the 13th century. The plays created during the Yuan Dynasty were performed well into the 16th century; many are still produced today.

Guan Hanqing (ca. 1245–ca.1322) is the best-known Yuan dramatist, and *Dou E Yuan* is his most famous play. Known as "China's Shakespeare," Guan played a large role in theatrical innovation and the cultural boom of a decisive historical age. Like Shakespeare, Guan's writings moved from the popular stage into canonical literature. The story of a woman wronged, her vengeful ghost and the ecological havoc such injustice provokes has captured the imaginations of generations of audiences.

COWHIG'S NEW CHINA

When the RSC commissioned its second playwright for the Chinese Classics Translation Project, the company turned to Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, who has earned accolades for her plays *The World of Extreme Happiness* and *The King of Hell's Palace* set in contemporary China, which chronicle the emotional, ethical and global effects of the rapidly changing superpower. Across her oeuvre, Cowhig provides an unflinching look at the consequences of human actions and an abiding interest in power and politics, whether she is writing about the legacy of Guantánamo Bay in *Lidless*, which won the Yale Drama Prize in 2009, or the cost of the American dream exported by global capitalism in *The World of Extreme Happiness*.

Cowhig returns to the contemporary Chinese factory town in *Snow in Midsummer*, weaving together the historical with the contemporary, the mythological with the ecological. *Snow in Midsummer* stages a ghost story, murder mystery, detective story, post-apocalyptic and supernatural adventure while pursuing justice—along with hope and possibility—in the human-disturbed landscapes of our own making.